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TELEGRAM

July 28, 2004

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TAGS: OIIP, EAID, OPRC, PREL, PHUM, PTER, KPAO, KDEM
Captions: None
Subject: MUSLIM WORLD OUTREACH--ABU DHABI RESPONSE
Ref: None

C O N F I D E N T I A L ABU DHABI 02524

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ACTION: PAO
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DISSEMINATION: PAO
CHARGE: ICAS

APPROVED: CDA: RALBRIGHT
DRAFTED: PAO: HMEDELSON, PO
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INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ABU DHABI 002524

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STATE FOR NEAPD - MQINN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/27/2014
TAGS: [KPAO](#) [OIIP](#) [EAID](#) [KDEM](#) [OPRC](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [KISL](#)
SUBJECT: MUSLIM WORLD OUTREACH--ABU DHABI RESPONSE

Classified by Charge d'Affaires, Richard A. Albright,
reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: There is little sign of an active political Islamic movement in the UAE. The UAEG promotes the moderate practice of Islam and the vast majority of religious group in the UAE follow a moderate practice of Islam in line with UAEG policy. The Mission is actively engaging Emirati society on several fronts: educational reforms, media training, empowerment of women, and information dissemination. Programs are conducted under the auspices of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and also with local resources as part of normal post cultural and press work. Special attention is being paid to programming in the economically disadvantaged and

conservative Northern Emirates (origin of two of the 9/11 hijackers) and to Emirati women students and faculty and women's NGOs. We should continue a low-profile approach that reinforces the moderation espoused by the UAEG. Additional Washington support would be welcomed and put to good use to strengthen and build upon what we have begun.

Local Context

¶2. (C) Although the UAE is a conservative society, the government promotes a moderate/tolerant practice of Islam. There is little sign of an active political Islamic movement in the UAE, primarily because the UAE is a wealthy country with a high per capita income. The leadership is responsive to its citizens' needs, encouraging them to use traditional mechanisms, such as the majlis, to air their grievances. In addition, there are no elected institutions, political parties, or a political opposition.

¶3. (C) Nearly all of the country's citizens (less than 20 percent of the total population) are Muslims, with approximately 85 percent followers of Sunni Islam and the remaining 15 percent followers of Shi'a Islam. The UAEG promotes the moderate practice of Islam in a number of different ways. The Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Awqaf operates as the central federal regulatory authority for Muslim imams and mosques and distributes weekly guidance on religious sermons to mosques and imams. The Government ensures that clergy do not deviate frequently or significantly from approved topics in content. The UAEG also conducts ongoing training for Imams, covering a variety of religious and social topics.

¶4. (C) After 9/11, the UAE senior leadership launched a comprehensive top-down security review to assess the impact of extremist thought and elements on UAE society. The UAEG closely scrutinized the activities of the UAE's mosques, schools, charities and NGOs. The UAEG also rounded up about 160 people suspected of ties to extremist groups for questioning. As part of this review, the UAEG passed comprehensive anti-money laundering legislation, initiated tighter controls on funds transferred into and out of the country, assessed the country's charities and NGOs, and took steps to eliminate cash fundraising at mosques and channel all charitable giving through government-regulated relief organizations.

¶5. (C) The UAE hosts a number of groups with a religious agenda, the vast majority of which follow a moderate practice of Islam in line with UAEG policy. These NGOs, which also have social, educational, cultural and charitable components, are funded in whole or part by the UAEG and do not generally receive funding from foreign sources. These groups rarely express anti-American sentiment, and when they do, it is almost always on grounds of U.S. foreign policy rather than religious grounds. Most groups with religious components sponsor Quranic instruction courses and religious workshops and lectures on Islam and encourage their members to maintain and uphold moderate Islamic traditions and values.

Engagement efforts

¶6. (C) The Mission is actively engaging Emirati society on several fronts: academic, educational reforms, media training, and information dissemination. Programs are conducted under the auspices of the Middle East Partnership Initiative and also with local resources as part of normal post cultural and press work. Special attention is being paid to programming in the economically disadvantaged and conservative Northern Emirates and to Emirati women students, faculty and women's non-governmental organizations.

Higher Education

17. (C) The Public Affairs section is working closely with institutions of higher education to send Emiratis to the U.S., to assist Emiratis to continue graduate study within their own country, and to enrich educational exchanges. For example, MEPI funds will send eight women students from the Higher Colleges of Technology Dubai campus to the U.S. to learn leadership skills in a program that will take them to the White House, Congress, and other key governmental institutions. MEPI small grants will assist Zayed University, the leading women's university, to conduct training for women teachers of English in the Ras al Khaimah educational zone. The Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce will receive a grant to strengthen a "Work Passports Program" to help high school and college graduates--mostly women but also some men--learn communication, computing and business skills to be able to compete successfully in the job market. Another grant was awarded to the University of Sharjah to help them bring five American experts to participate in a faculty development workshop next October. Zayed University is utilizing a grant to award partial scholarships to four women students--two from Abu Dhabi, two from Dubai--to attend a new master's degree program in educational leadership to be offered in September 2004.

18. (C) One of the biggest challenges remaining is to increase the number of Emirati students attending higher education institutions in the U.S. The number decreased significantly post 9/11 from 2,500 to 800, according to the UAE Embassy in the U.S. At present, there are 220 UAE students in the U.S. under the auspices of the scholarship department of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, including 60 post-graduate students. Before 2001, there were about 400 scholarship students in the U.S. Although the visa approval process for Emirati men now takes only a couple of days, perceptions remain strong that the U.S. does not want Muslim students and that Muslims face open discrimination in the U.S. The Mission has worked very hard over the past two years to counter this perception by sending educational advisors and counselor officers to campuses to talk about study in the U.S. and explain the new visa regulations. The UAEG remains strongly committed to sending its students to the U.S. and the Minister of Higher Education has informally decreed that all Emiratis who qualify for scholarships to study in the U.S. will receive them.

American Corners

19. (C) The Minister of Higher Education attended the opening of an American Corner that was established at the UAE's primary university for Emiratis, the UAE University in Al Ain. A second American Corner will be established in the northern Emirate of Fujairah. American Corners are small libraries that contain books on English language teaching, how to study in the U.S., U.S. business information and American fiction. They are often used as venues to program U.S. speakers.

English Language Micro-scholarships

10. (C) PA has received \$100,000 to develop micro scholarships to allow 100 economically disadvantaged students in to study English in local institutes. PA works closely with the Manama based Regional English Language Officer to assist Emirati educational zones to strengthen English language teaching and is also working with the Ministry of Education and Youth to develop educational reform policies.

¶11. (C) PAS is strengthening its relationships with NGOs, especially women's NGOs. PAS has partnered with the General Women's Union, the coordinating body for other women's NGOs, to develop skill-training and leadership programs. PAS' Information Resource Center Director taught a course on developing web pages to market small businesses and PAS is bringing a U.S. expert to teach a workshop on marketing handicraft products.

Information Dissemination

¶12. (C) PAS has initiated a proactive information dissemination program by developing electronic outreach mechanisms. The Department's new embassy web page design and content management system was implemented and promoted and PAS is spearheading a mission wide effort to post short stories about public programs, to tell the embassy's story to the UAE. In addition, the Information Resource Center is distributing U.S. policy documents to Emiratis by listserv in order to get accurate and authoritative information into the hands of policy makers and opinion leaders.

Media Engagement--Countering Anti-American Sentiment

¶13. (C) Another critical dimension to countering anti Americanism is to engage the press. According to a recent Zogby International report, "Impressions of America 2004," overall favorable ratings throughout most of the region toward the U.S. have declined in the past two years. Most Arabs have only indirect or received knowledge about America and the principle source of that knowledge comes from the Arab media. Dubai is a regional hub for Arab media and the UAE has moved to support freedom of the press and expression by establishing Media City. PAS is developing a strong program to develop media skills training. Post has brought U.S. experts to the UAE to teach workshops and PAS IRC Director, a former Fulbrighter and U.S. graduate in information technology, is developing a strong outreach program both in the UAE and regionally. He is working closely with the Abu Dhabi based regional Information Resources Officer to develop IT programs for media to teach how to use the Internet for research and verification, to access accurate and authoritative USG information, to publish on the Internet and to better understand intellectual and property law and copyright issues.

¶14. (C) So far, programs have been conducted at al-Bayan newspaper (attended by journalists from throughout the region), the Emirates News Media, al-Arabiya TV station and other media outlets. These programs are increasing in popularity indicated by an increasing number of requests for more such programs. Skill training programs, especially those done by local staff who speak Arabic, builds trust and strengthens partnerships with local journalists and media institutions and presents them with authoritative sources on U.S. society and values. Furthermore, they now know to turn to the IRC Director for accurate and authoritative information on the U.S. The IRC Director and the IRO have traveled to other GCC countries to conduct similar programs, most notably at the offices of al-Jazeera's web site al-Jazeera.net.

¶15. Hosting over 550 media outlets and 170 free lance journalists, Dubai's Media City has become the most important center for broadcasting in the Middle East. MBC (parent company of al-Arabiya) moved its headquarters and production center from London to Dubai in 2003. Its affiliate al-Arabiya is based in Dubai. The Media City has

enormous plans for growth as a center for media, IT, education and entertainment. Al-Arabiya's senior managers have repeatedly made the point that if we want to shape the news Arabs hear, we need to engage with the Arab media in Arabic. Given the growing concentration of media outlets in Dubai, they have urged us to appoint an Arabic speaking press attaché who can engage with the media on regional issues in Arabic and in real time.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) Post is utilizing MEPI funds and limited post resources to engage Emirati society to strengthen moderate Muslim voices and counter anti-American sentiment. We should continue a low-profile approach that reinforces the moderation espoused by the UAEG. MEPI, which has as its mission to support voices of change in the Middle East, is one of the vehicles for accomplishing this. Our programs have a strong multiplier effect, because the UAE is a cultural crossroads for the Middle East and South Asia, a regional center for business, finance, media, and higher education, and is strongly promoting educational and employment opportunities for women and is closely watched by other GCC countries. Post has few financial resources to draw upon with the exception of MEPI funds. More money for International Visitors, U.S. Speakers, media training, and American Corners would strengthen existing programs. Additional Washington support would be welcomed and put to good use to strengthen and build upon what we have begun.

Albright